

A WWII veteran remembers

Christmas & the Battle of the Bulge

As the great conflict of World War II approached its conclusion, the author's unit, a part of the American First Army in northern Europe, found itself in Aachen, the first city of consequence to be seized in Germany. We set up our headquarters in the Aachen Court House, and locked our two hundred German prisoners of war in the Aachen Jail.

By December of 1944 winter had settled into northern Europe, and the Allied sweep from Normandy across France and Belgium had stretched its supply line 350 miles from Cherbourg. Although the port of Antwerp was in Allied hands, its use had been delayed while the Canadians were clearing the channel ports. The American advance had been slowed by a shortage of fuel brought about by having to rely upon deliveries by "Red Ball Express" trucks operating from Cherbourg. The spectacular Allied offensive was slowing down as it reached the German border.

In the meantime, the Germans were planning a massive counterattack through the dense forest of the Ardennes region, with Antwerp as its objective, in an effort to split the Allied armies. Twenty-five divisions, of which ten were armored divisions, were assembled secretly for the campaign.

In a heavy snowfall and freezing weather, only a little more than a week before Christmas, a German force of 250,000 men, a heavy concentration of artillery and approximately one thousand tanks and armored vehicles, along with fifteen hundred aircraft, suddenly struck 83,000 American troops on December 16, in what became known as the Battle of the Bulge.

The old aphorism, "the fog of war," became a vivid depiction of the situation of that time. Aachen was a part of the northern hinge of the bulge, and all hell broke loose immediately south of that city, and continued west for another approximately sixty miles. Orders arrived for our unit to stay off the roads. All night and day, American armored and infantry divisions were moved back west through Aachen as they were withdrawn from the concentration east of that city, to be redeployed west and south to contain the bulge. To those of us in Aachen it appeared to be a wholesale American retreat. In our efforts to learn something of what was going on, we turned on the German radio, among other sources, only to be informed by the German announcer that Field Marshal von Rundstedt was going to present Aachen to der Fuhrer as a Christmas present — and there we sat in the midst of what to us seemed a full-scale American retreat, with our orders to stay off the roads. It was a rather tense and

dreary prospect, particularly being saddled with two hundred hostile German prisoners.

The Aachen Jail, where the German prisoners of war were held, was the pattern of many American prisons of that day, i.e., stories of rows of cells onto balconies around an open center courtyard, with a large skylight above the center court. The skylight had been blown out during the siege of that city, and the courtyard was open to the sky. The early days of the German counteroffensive had plagued the Americans with cloudy weather and fog amid a heavy snowfall and galling freezes.

On the afternoon of Christmas Eve, a German major, the senior prisoner, asked for an audience with our commanding officer. He stated that the prisoners had gotten together a chorus of sixteen voices, and he made an earnest plea for permission to have the group sing Christmas carols to its fellow prisoners that evening, from the center of the court yard. It seemed a reasonable request, but we Americans could not be sure that there was not some sort of deception involved. Permission was granted for the concert, but two machine guns were set up to cover the courtyard and cells just in case some trick should develop.

By Christmas Eve night, the snow stopped falling and the fog and clouds cleared away. A bright moon filled the jail courtyard with its kindly light, and the air was cold and crisp. The sixteen-man chorus took its place in the center of the courtyard in a spotlight halo of soft moonlight. We Americans were out in armed force, ready for any emergency which might arise.

There was no disturbance, however, other than outlying artillery fire and an occasional aircraft overhead.

As the choir sang its traditional carols in German, many familiar and some unfamiliar to us Americans, voices from choirboy tenor to basso profundo gently permeated our little world, and a great peace settled over the scene. There we were, deadly bitter enemies, all far from home and homesick for Christmas with our families, worshiping the same God together for a brief moment in dreams of home and loved ones. In the spell of the moment, the war faded away and a wave of the glorious magic of Christmas poured into our souls. The kind gloaming of moonlight hid the tears of those present.

As long as life gives me breath, I shall never forget that Christmas Eve night half a century ago at the Aachen Jail.

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